

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON POST
17 February 1985

Mideast Future in Flux

Syria Is Next Step on Path of Diplomacy

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The immediate future of new Arab diplomacy with Israel hinges on decisions to be made in Syria, according to administration officials monitoring the swiftly changing Middle East situation.

Syria's official media have reflected strong opposition to efforts by Jordan's King Hussein and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat to unite for direct negotiations with Israel. The important question is how effective and sustained Syria's opposition will be. As Washington edged cautiously toward renewed engagement in Arab-Israeli negotiations, the State Department sent two

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friendly diplomatic signals to Syria about U.S. policy toward the Golan Heights and the gaining of freedom by an American journalist from Syrian-controlled eastern Lebanon.

U.S. policy makers are watching with unusual interest the trip to Damascus this weekend by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, who is expected to inform Syrian President Hafez Assad about the U.S.-Saudi discussions here last week and to probe Assad's position on the Jordan-PLO maneuvers. Bandar was a participant in the two working sessions last week between President Reagan and Saudi King Fahd and in other Saudi discussions with senior U.S. officials.

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U.S. relations with Syria, which is armed and backed politically by the Soviet Union, have been poor throughout the Reagan administration. Syria blocked implementation of the U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Lebanese accords of May 17, 1983, and was accused of masterminding military and terrorist opposition that brought about withdrawal of U.S. combat troops a year ago.

At the height of U.S. military involvement late in 1983, Syrian anti-aircraft batteries in Lebanon fired on U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and American warplanes and ships attacked Syrian positions in return. The two nations at that point seemed close to expanding warfare.

Soviet support for Syria and the Soviet position on the Jordan-PLO "framework for joint action" are among the expected topics for U.S. and Soviet diplomats meeting Tuesday and Wednesday in Vienna to discuss Middle East issues. The State Department, mindful of fears that Washington and Moscow might make deals at the expense of regional powers, insists that the talks will be only "an exchange of views."